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A secret no more: This Virginia Beach native is among the youngest merchant mariners out there.

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VIRGINIA BEACH

George Pickard had a secret to keep.

It was 2015 and the Virginia Beach native was entering Texas A&M's maritime academy. Surrounded by peers who were mostly 22 or 23 years old, George was just 15. He and other higher-ups tried their best to conceal that fact. Ship captains might worry about liability. Students might ask, "How can a 15-year-old do my job?"

Col. Rick Mallahan, who's retired from the Air Force and was the academy's then-deputy superintendent, had seen 15-year-olds come through the college's Corps of Cadets program, but never at the maritime academy, where about 500 students attend the coastal Galveston campus. The colonel wanted to give George a shot.

"I wanted to show these guys – age isn't a factor," Mallahan said. "Before we condemn this guy, let's see how it works out."

And it worked out well.

Today George, who grew up spending time on the water and attended Princess Anne High School for a bit, has passed his exams and is on his way to working as a seafarer.

Merchant marine officers stand watch on large vessels transporting cargo. Whatever job he might land, George, who just celebrated his 19th birthday, could end up on any number of ships sailing around the world.

He might be one of the youngest doing so.

At 18, George Pickard broke a record, becoming the youngest graduate in the academy's history. He's a Third Mate, one of just four who reached that credential at 18 since 2014, the U.S. Coast Guard's National Maritime Center said.

His journey didn't start without concerns.

Mike Pickard remembers second guessing himself about leaving his young son at a military-type academy. After dropping George off, he half expected a phone call telling him to come back.

A year before, his son had been in high school at Princess Anne, just a few minutes from their home. Before that he attended Old Donation, a magnet school for gifted students in Virginia Beach.

He'd always been interested in the ocean. He could sail boats on the creek behind their home, and he went scuba diving with his father. At home, he'd listen to his father's friends in the industry.

"They're always spinning these sea stories," Mike Pickard said.

When he was 12, George tagged along with his father to Philadelphia. The ship Mike Pickard had trained on, the TS Empire State, was docked there for an alumni event. The sheer size of it was daunting, but George remembers thinking, "I can handle this."

By the time he was 14 or 15, George made a decision: Princess Anne wasn't a good fit. He left for Tidewater Community College.

After building up credits, he applied and got accepted into Texas A&M so he could attend the maritime academy.



George Pickard, right, is pictured with Rick Mallahan, a retired Air Force colonel, at Pickard's graduation from Texas A&M this past August. Pickard credits Mallahan as being a big reason he got into the school's maritime academy. Pickard was accepted into the maritime academy at age 15 and graduated at 18, becoming the youngest person to graduate from the program in school history. (Photo courtesy of George Pickard)

It was Col. Mallahan who found a ship captain willing to take on so young a student. He checked federal regulations and age requirements and instructed George's leaders not to tell everyone about his age. Only a few people knew. Fortunately, George was tall for his age, around 6 feet. Word eventually trickled out by his second year.

Mallahan said in his experience, younger students tend to be much harder workers.

"That was George to a T," Mallahan said.

In his first few months, George would frequently stop by Mallahan's office to let the colonel know he was doing well.

"It wasn't really possible without him," George said.

Before he could be a full mariner, he needed to pass a 7-part exam, the equivalent of a bar exam for lawyers. Most of George's classmates waited to give themselves more time to study, but George wanted to get it done. He took the first five parts soon after graduation, and waited only on the last two – about celestial navigation and rules of the road. He passed.

To help him mark his accomplishment, Mallahan traveled about four hours to Pickard's graduation in Galveston. He only does that for his top students. He recalls George as having matured from the last time he saw him.

He appeared ready for any job.

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